

Thoughts on Human Intelligence & AI

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When considering the nature of human intelligence in researching AI we often concentrate on the mechanics – especially in the way data analysis can lead to accurate predictions. But human intelligence is an odd thing and in attempting to build systems that “learn” we are not really copying human intelligence. Rather we are converging to an idealised model of how we think our reasoning processes work in certain situations.

Anyone who watches or reads the main media outlets is bombarded by intelligent people telling us what they believe is happening in the world (usually mainly the bad or contentious things to get ratings and clicks). More interestingly they give (or sometimes imply) their opinion usually backed and justified by relevant “experts”. For example, most people would agree that Russia Today, Fox News, CNN, The Washington Post, the Guardian, The Daily Mail etc. all tend to a particular political viewpoint. In fact, the recent attempt by Mr. Bloomberg to win the US Democratic nomination was notable for the edict he gave his journalists at his news organisation **not** to write negative stories about any Democratic politician. There was remarkably little outcry about this. Another aspect of human reasoning is coming to the fore here. When people we like or agree with say or do stuff, we make allowances. When the same things are said or done by people we do not like we tend to project nefarious reasons onto them. We imagine we can read their innermost thoughts and those thoughts are bad.

Social media is also awash with people pontificating on what is best for the rest of us. This is complicated by the fact that we tend to consume the “facts” and “opinions” that conform to our own views and prejudices: The so-called “echo-chamber” effect. This is why there are so many people with cognitive dissonance when elections or referenda don’t go the way they expect. For example, in the last UK election, the social media activity of the losing Labour party was much greater than that of the winning Tory party. There were many more positive Facebook and Twitter comments on Labour policy and tactics than any of the other parties. This led many politicians and experts to say Labour won the argument. And caused great consternation among Labour supporters.

When you have this level of cognitive dissonance, our nature as humans is to look for an external reason why things did not go the way we, as superior intellects, expected. Even very brainy people with lots of degrees and awards start demonising the people who do not agree with them rather than addressing the reasons people may think differently.

Politics is one of the most contentious areas where this example of “I know best” is prevalent. But there are many others. Usually led by senior academics who are, by objective standards, “intelligent”.

For example, it is virtually impossible currently in academia or the mass media to have reasoned debates (with differing viewpoints) on issues such as sexual identity and biology, man-made climate change, immigration and migration, nuclear power, children’s education etc.

Objectively intelligent people believe they have come to the best decisions regarding the sensitive issues above. But to me the interesting part is, not so much the decisions that emerge, but the stifling of alternative views as being unacceptable to even consider. When we build AI systems, we make no value judgements on the original data given to the system. Some clever people seem willing to limit their data sets to acceptable data and dismiss what they regard as unacceptable data. This can be dangerous if the "unacceptable" data is potentially valuable in predicting outcomes. There is already a tendency in academic research to ignore data that does not fit the narrative. (This has always been the case by the way – it just seems more prevalent nowadays.)

Why is this? The missing part of human intelligence in some people is not just humility – though that would help – it is that much underused word – wisdom.

I have worked with several people with tremendous academic credentials, eminent professors and so forth. The ones whose judgement I would personally rely on tend to be open to opposing views, are patently humble and interested in learning and adapting. They are wise, in the sense that they know how to use their intelligence effectively. Not to put themselves in a superior position over the rest of us but to realise they are exactly like us.

We need to be careful as we build more and more intelligent systems. Ethics in AI is a developing field and we must build systems that are of benefit and not harmful to us. But this is more difficult if some of the designers are narrow minded, arrogant, unkind, and dismissive of whole sections of society. A truly intelligent AI would consider us as brothers and sisters not as slaves. Now we just need to ensure we as people, however superior in intellect we believe we are, do the same.

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